



## Structures for Belonging: A Synthesis of Research on Belonging-Supportive Learning Environments

BY KALEEN HEALEY AND CHLOE STROMAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | FEBRUARY 2021

**Belonging is a universal human need that is fundamentally linked to learning and well-being.** It describes an individual's experience of feeling that they are, or are likely to be, accepted and respected as a valued contributor in a specific environment. When students experience a sense of belonging in a learning environment, there are both immediate and long-term positive consequences for their academic performance and well-being.

To assess whether we belong in a given context, we search the environment for cues such as interpersonal interactions, the presence (or lack thereof) and success of other people who share our identity markers, and the opportunities we have to participate in and shape the environment. **When we are processing and reacting to these cues because they threaten or undermine our belonging, we have fewer cognitive resources to devote to learning.** Over time, persistent and pervasive worries about belonging can lead people to disengage and disidentify with a given context.

**Individual students experience the same cues in the same environment differently**—and come to different, well-informed conclusions about whether they belong both because we each have unique prior experiences and because groups are situated differently in society due

to historical power dynamics. It follows that belonging concerns are not equally distributed.

**Students from marginalized groups are often expected to learn in exclusionary spaces where they are not valued or authentically included. In these spaces, it may be impossible for them to belong.** Due to the social, political, and historical context of U.S. society, Black, Latinx, and Native American students and students from families experiencing poverty are more likely to attend schools that are materially inferior to those afforded their more advantaged peers. This reinforces negative stereotypes and deficit-based narratives about the academic interests and abilities of marginalized groups, while **policies, practices, and norms that are steeped in racist, sexist, and classist narratives and beliefs about intelligence and merit systematically support the belonging of students from advantaged groups.**

Research from a range of disciplines suggests that belonging-supportive learning environments share a set of interrelated characteristics, which, together, communicate to students that their presence and intellectual and social contributions are valued. Belonging-supportive environments:

- **Respect each student's identity along multiple dimensions**, so that every student feels understood and known as a person and thinker in the environment.
- **Affirm each student's capacity to succeed** in the environment by combining high expectations with the feedback and support needed to meet them.
- **Recognize each student's agency and contributions to the classroom**, institution, community, and society.

**Learning environments that support belonging for every student must challenge exclusion and also promote inclusion.** Practices, policies, and norms throughout our education system provide signals to students about the extent to which they are respected and valued as members and contributors in the learning environment. Research-based opportunities to systematically support every student's belonging include:

- Increasing **access to learning environments** by ensuring equitable access to accelerated or advanced coursework and eliminating exclusionary and inequitably applied discipline practices in favor of more supportive approaches.
- Supporting **relationships with educators, peers, and families** by helping educators to develop critical consciousness, engaging students in collaborative and small group learning opportunities, and welcoming students' families as educational partners with valuable expertise.

- Utilizing **instructional resources and pedagogy** that counter negative stereotypes and create cultural continuity via instructional activities that draw on students' experiences, use collaboration and exploration, and are relevant for communal goals.
- Attending to **system-level policies and practices** to communicate respect and support for every student, ensure the equitable use of resources and access to information, and engage students in system-level decision-making.

Current examples such as the African American Male Achievement initiative in Oakland Unified School District, the ethnic studies curriculum in San Francisco Unified School District, and the College of Chemistry at University of California, Berkeley show what it looks like to create opportunities to belong within these aspects of the environment. Researchers have documented positive student outcomes from these efforts to challenge exclusion and promote inclusion. Moreover, they demonstrate that stakeholders and decision makers at every level of our education system – not just educators and peers – have opportunities to shape student belonging through the environments they create.

---

Read the full synthesis [here](#).